

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the HINCHINGBROOKE COUNTRY PARK JOINT GROUP held as a Remote Meeting via Zoom on Friday, 12 March 2021

PRESENT: Councillor R J West – Chairman.

Councillors Mrs A Costello, Mrs S R Wilson and Mrs M L Beuttell.

APOLOGY: An Apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor T D Sanderson.

8 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 16th October 2020 were approved as a correct record.

9 MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

10 SENIOR RANGER'S REPORT

The Group received a PowerPoint presentation by the Senior Ranger outlining park activities for the period October 2020 to March 2021. In doing so, comment was made as follows:

Staffing and Volunteers

COVID-19 continued to impact both staff and volunteers over the reporting period. Volunteer work parties were unable to progress which had resulted in increased work upon staff at a time when the Park remained busy owing to the national lockdown. This was further exacerbated with one member of staff having undergone planned surgery but the Café Supervisor fortunately stepped in to help with ranger tasks and practical work where possible.

Volunteering activities also ceased again in November 2020 as many were in the vulnerable or shielding category. Where safe to do so, solo volunteering activities had commenced. SEN volunteers were yet to be welcomed back to the Country Park and their return would be undertaken in collaboration with carers and Cambridgeshire County Council who funded their placements.

Members were encouraged to note that every countryside volunteer received a handmade edible Christmas gift which was hand delivered by a member of staff enabling a welfare check to be undertaken as well. The return of the Green Team volunteers was planned for week beginning 8th March 2021 with small work parties returning thereafter from 29th March 2021 onwards. Having received an explanation on the background to the Green Team, Members were

assured that appropriate risk assessments had been undertaken to welcome the group back on site.

Park Management

Despite the lack of volunteers and additional usage of the Park, the Group were encouraged to note the range of work undertaken at the site over the reporting period which included the application of the second layer to path along the Top Ride in Bob's Wood, essential tree safety works, winter tree works creating a glade in Bob's Wood together with the felling of a section of the new plantation, pulling reeds in the wash, construction of an outdoor shelter near the café to facilitate COVID safe usage, the sourcing and production of new benches around the café, improvements to the bird hide area, preparing and re-siting the Tern Raft on the wildlife lake and keeping up with increased litter and anti-social behaviour at the Park.

In response to a question raised by a Member, the Countryside Manager reported that she was in contact with a local resident who organised community litter picks and that the District Council would be partaking in the Great British Spring Clean campaign again which would be taking place from 28 May to 13 June 2021.

The Group noted planned activities over the spring/summer which included urgent temporary repairs to flood damaged paths, installation of more outdoor benches, annual refurbishment of benches and park furniture, follow up on last year's work with surveys and assess impact on wildlife, assisting Huntingdon Bee Keepers association in preparing the apiary for spring/summer and starting the mowing and strimming regime for the amenity grass. Having regard to the former, it was noted that the ground remained saturated and there was a risk that water levels may rise again in the future.

Community Groups

The Group were encouraged to note that a number of the Park's Community Groups were currently in discussion about their return to the Park. Particular mention was made of the Brampton Angling Society who had experienced an increase in membership during lockdown. Together with funding from the Environment Agency the Park would be expanding and improving its offer by introducing platforms and way marker posts. The latter would add value across the Park and not just for anglers.

Satellite Sites

The Group were encouraged to note that the Views Common, Stukeley Meadows and Spring Common sites had experienced an increase in footfall over the reporting period. Work undertaken on the latter site included a deep clean on litter, repairs made to the bridge for improve safety and stump treatment to slow down the willow encroachment.

Countryside Centre

Attention was drawn to occupancy levels and the number of bookings taken at the Countryside Centre compared to previous financial years. Unsurprisingly, the

Centre had been closed for a majority of the year and in terms of income £4,500 had been generated to date, which was unlikely to change between now and the end of the financial year. This represented around 20% of the forecast budget. Members were reminded of the vacancy which existed at the Countryside Centre and that booking enquiries were currently being dealt with by the Countryside Manager. Enquiries were gradually increasing with previous users of the Centre now enquiring about the use of the site, albeit some meetings might operate in an alternative way e.g. virtually. This has however helped to inform and develop plans for the future development of the Park with consideration currently being given to reducing the size of the meeting room.

Members noted that 16th February 2021 marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Countryside Centre which was celebrated via the Facebook page.

Café

As expected, there has been a decline in Café users attributed to a combination of factors including adverse weather conditions, the imposition of national restrictions on socialising and the removal of seating as a means of deterring users from congregating together. A “Grab and Go” service continued to operate however food items were limited to “walk and eat” options such as hot sausage rolls and pasties. Members were encouraged to note that a new covered outdoor seating area had been constructed outside the Café.

The Countryside Manager briefly explained the types of complaints received as a result of the latest lockdown. Members concurred with the view that the option of offering hot food and beverages to be consumed alongside a walk around the Park benefitted greatly to people’s mental health and proved invaluable to the local community.

Events

Facebook and other social media platforms such as YouTube have been utilised to keep users engaged. Facebook followers have now increased to 8,092 which was pleasing to note. Provisional bookings for film events throughout July and New Year’s Eve celebrations have been made, promotional material for which would be released nearer the time.

Investment Programme

Members were acquainted with details of the multi-faceted investment programme, timescales for which had been delayed by another 12 months owing to COVID-19. As previously mentioned, plans were already underway to improve angling facilities and further watersport improvements were currently being discussed with the Canoe Club and other watersport organisations to improve changing facilities. Signage was in the process of being designed and modern play equipment was undergoing the tender process. Other planned improvements included those to footpaths and the lakeside circular route as well as alterations to the Countryside Centre and enlarging the car park on site. Members were informed that building works would be governed by the presence of great crested newts and works would only commence when appropriate to do so.

Financial Position

Members attention was drawn to the forecast outturn position of the Park for the 2020/21 financial year where it was noted that there would be an expected overspend across all Countryside Services owing to the coronavirus pandemic. It was expected that the use of the Café and Countryside Centre would not reach pre-COVID levels at the end of the financial year.

In response to questions raised by a Member concerning the availability of any grant funding, the Countryside Manager advised that the site predominantly remained open throughout the pandemic. Whilst the Café had been closed for 6 weeks, staff had been redeployed to work elsewhere during this time.

Any Other Business

A meeting of the Friends of Hinchingsbrooke Country Park was currently being arranged however it was undecided as yet whether this would be a virtual or face to face meeting.

At the conclusion of the meeting the Group thanked Adam Green, Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny) for his support to Members during his time at the District Council and wished him well in his future role.

11 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Hinchingsbrooke Country Park Joint Group would be held on 15th October 2021 at 10:00am.

Chairman